

Georgia, Russia in New Abkhazia Standoff

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Tbilisi ups the ante on Russian peacekeeping presence.

Georgian security forces have again had a confrontation with Russian peacekeepers on the border with Abkhazia, leading to a tense telephone conversation between the two presidents.

The detention of a Russian army truck by Georgian police appears to be part of a war of nerves over the disputed territory of Abkhazia.

Tbilisi claims the Russians are engaged in annexing Abkhazia and insists their peacekeeping forces must be disbanded, while Moscow says the troops are operating under an international mandate and are providing vital security for the Abkhaz.

Georgian television channels showed pictures of local police stopping a truck carrying Russian peacekeepers near the village of Rukhi on June 17. They reported that it was carrying weapons illegally through the conflict zone, close to the administrative border with Abkhazia.

The four soldiers on board the vehicle were released after seven hours in detention. On June 19, the truck was handed back but the Georgians said they were holding onto 20 anti-tank missiles pending an investigation.

The Georgians said that the Russians had not asked permission to transport the missiles as they were required to do under the terms that govern the peacekeeping presence.

Colonel Vladimir Rogozin, commander of the southern zone of the peacekeeping operation – which comes under the mandate of the Commonwealth of Independent States, CIS, but is entirely manned by Russian troops – said he had simply failed to inform the Georgians about the arms shipment in time.

“They were normal weapons permitted by our mandate, and I don’t understand why the Georgians detained our soldiers,” said Rogozin.

According to the Kremlin, in a June 18 phone conversation with his Georgian counterpart Mikheil Saakashvili, the new Russian president Dmitry Medvedev called the incident “an inadmissible provocation against Russian peacekeepers who are carrying out their work in accordance with international obligations”.

The Georgian foreign ministry, meanwhile, said President Saakashvili had called on Moscow “to refrain from unilateral actions and to follow agreed procedures for transporting weapons”.

The Russian and Georgian defence ministries also exchanged recriminations, with the former saying the arms shipment was entirely legal and the Georgians saying it “violates all agreements”.

Shota Utiashvili, head of the Georgian interior ministry's analysis department said, "the confiscated material will not be returned until an investigation is completed".

The United Nations monitoring mission for Abkhazia, UNOMIG, is conducting its own investigation into the incident.

The row comes as Tbilisi debates whether to demand the complete withdrawal of Russian peacekeepers, who have been stationed both in Abkhazia and in the western Georgian region of Samegrelo since a ceasefire was signed to end the Abkhazian conflict in 1994.

On June 9, President Saakashvili said his government had sent a letter in May to the secretariat of the CIS demanding consultations on the peacekeeping force, and noting that Georgia reserved the right to withhold its consent for the peacekeepers.

"One month has already elapsed and now we can raise this issue [the withdrawal of Russian peacekeeping troops] at any time," he added.

Russian foreign ministry spokesman Andrei Nesterenko warned against such a move, saying, "The Georgian leadership ought to be aware that this irrational step would inevitably inflame the situation and 'thaw out' the conflict, which could destabilise the situation in the Caucasus as a whole."

De facto Abkhaz president Sergei Bagapsh was even blunter, saying, "We are not planning any negotiations with the Georgians. As far as Abkhazia is concerned, it will never return to being part of Georgia. The main point is that we will never agree to the withdrawal of Russian peacekeepers from the conflict zone."

Western countries have condemned recent Russian actions in Abkhazia. In Congressional hearings on June 18 in Washington, US assistant secretary of state Daniel Fried suggested that an additional force of troops despatched to Abkhazia did not resemble peacekeepers. In April, he said, Russia had "without consulting Georgia, sent highly-trained airborne combat troops with howitzers to Abkhazia as part of its peacekeeping force".

Fried went on, "We are very concerned about these actions, which challenge Georgia's territorial integrity and have increased tensions in the separatist regions. They risk igniting a wider conflict, and call into question Russia's role as a peacekeeper and facilitator of negotiations between Georgia and Abkhazia and South Ossetia, respectively."

However, Georgia's western friends have not backed its calls for an end to the Russian peacekeeping force, probably believing that if the troops were forced to leave Georgian-controlled areas, they would almost certainly remain in Abkhazia as occupiers rather than legal peacekeepers, thus making the conflict even more intractable.

The situation on the ground in the conflict zone remains tense. The head of the de facto administration in Gali region in southern Abkhazia, Ruslan Kishmaria, said Tbilisi had resumed unmanned reconnaissance flights over Abkhazia. He added that the Abkhaz authorities had decided not to shoot the planes down.

The Abkhaz say they have shot down several Georgian drones on previous occasions, while Tbilisi denied that most of the alleged incidents took place. In late May, a United Nations report concluded that a drone shot down over Abkhazia on April 20 was hit by a Russian fighter plane.

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